

Basic Training: Approaching the Throne of Grace

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April 18, 2015

1 Chronicles 29:10-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:14-25; Matthew 6:7-15

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is Matthew 6:7-15. Let's listen to the Word of God together. "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.'"

I have never met a person who said, "I wish I'd prayed less." Every sincere Christian wishes they would pray more often, with more conviction that God was listening and more passion for God's glory. There are plenty of reasons why we don't, but I've never met someone who thought more prayer was a bad idea. Church history shows us that people who are effective for God's Kingdom are praying people. Going back to our *Basic Training* theme, we know we should exercise more. It's good for us. If prayer is even better for us than exercise, draws us closer to God, and strengthens us to meet the challenges of our days, why don't we do them?

I found an answer from author and Presbyterian pastor John Piper. He said: "One of the main reasons so many of God's children don't have a significant prayer life is not so much that we don't want to, but that we don't plan to. If you want to take a four-week vacation, you don't just get up one summer morning and say, 'Hey, let's go today!' You won't have anything ready. You won't know where to go. Nothing has been planned. But that is how many of us treat prayer. We get up day after day and realize that significant times of prayer should be a part of our life, but nothing's ever ready. We don't know where to go. Nothing has been planned. No time. No place. No procedure. And we all know that the opposite of planning is not a wonderful flow of deep, spontaneous experiences in prayer. The opposite of planning is the rut. If you don't plan a vacation you will probably stay home and watch TV. The natural, unplanned flow of spiritual life sinks to the lowest ebb of vitality. There is a race to be run and a fight to be fought. If you want renewal in your life of prayer, you must PLAN to see it."

So friends, let's start planning. Jesus didn't teach a time to pray; we just have to decide on one. A few weeks ago, Jesus encouraged us to pray in a quiet place where we could get alone with God. We can all find one. Today, Jesus gives us the procedure. We probably don't think of the Lord's Prayer as a handbook to prayer. Most of us have recited it countless times. But it's not just an excellent prayer we can pray at any place at any time no matter how much time we have. It is the perfect guide to every other prayer we could ever pray. If you feel lost about how to pray or what to pray, the Lord's Prayer answers your question. If you know the Lord's Prayer, you know the content of every good prayer.

Before Jesus teaches us His prayer, He tells what to avoid, namely babbling. In Greek, it's onomopoeia, literally meaning "keep on blah blah blah ing." It has been translated "vain repetitions," and that's good, too. In the Old Testament, we see the priests of Baal shout for hours for Baal to accept their sacrifice; Elijah, their rival, prays briefly to God and fire consumes Elijah's sacrifice on the spot, even though Elijah's poured gallons of water on it. In the New Testament, the craftsmen who accost Paul and his friends in Ephesus yell to their god Artemis for two hours straight.

Pagans thought they were doing business with their gods; constant repetition would wear them down and make them cave to their requests. God knows what we need and is pleased to give it to us at the right time, so there's no need to pray over and over, not even the Lord's Prayer. Isn't that awesome...God knows what we need before we ask, before we even know!

You can pray for the same thing more than once – Jesus did this before His arrest in the garden of Gethsemane – but for Christians, prayer is about our relationship with God. Jesus didn't believe that by repeating His prayer the Father would spare Him from the cross; by repeating His prayer, Jesus continually turned His will over to the Father when it would have been easy to say "no." We are persistent in prayer – we don't give up – but we don't wear down God or earn favor with Him by saying the same words again and again or saying a lot of words.

The prayer has an important structure we've seen before. We learned a few months ago that the Ten Commandments are divided into two parts – our relationship with God and our relationship with others. That's also true of the Lord's Prayer. The first half focuses on God – His person, His will, and His Kingdom. The second half brings up everything that distracts us from God – our needs, our guilt, our temptations. The two sections together focus us right on God and His glory, and the removal of anything that would distract us from Him and His glory. Good prayers do the same thing, emphasizing God and His rightful place in our lives.

So now we get to the prayer itself. There's a ton packed into the first four words. "Our Father in heaven." Our first guide is in the very first word – "our." It's plural. It continues throughout the prayer. "Give *us*." "Forgive *us*." "Lead *us*." "Deliver *us*." Everything is about believers together. That doesn't mean we never pray from a personal perspective; the Psalms do; Jesus did. But our prayers are always to be intercessory.

Intercession simply means "standing in the gap." In court, lawyers intercede, speaking for the parties involved. When we pray, our task is to pray for ourselves while interceding for others. Listen carefully to your prayers and ask, "Is this all about me?" Every request in the Lord's Prayer includes us, but it's not about us alone. We are in this together. We pray for each other. As we do, God will also answer our prayers that pertain specifically to us.

The word "Father" is tricky. Not because God isn't our Father, but because "father" is formal in English. If I ever went up to my dad and said, "Father," he knew I was going to ask for something! This word is about "Dad," a father in the best sense, someone we can relate to and who wants to relate to us. Jews never called God Father, only the father of the nation. But Hebrews 4:16 tells us we can approach the throne of grace with confidence – confidence based on God as our loving Father, who dotes on and provides for His children.

The words “in heaven” do two things. First, they differentiate our Heavenly Father from our earthly ones. Second, they establish God’s unique status. He is a wonderful Father we can approach, yet He is also the Heavenly Father, the one who made all things, who controls all things, who rules and reigns over all things, and not only deserves our heartfelt love as Papa but also commands our respect as Lord and King. God is wonderful and loving, but He’s also beyond us. We are not Him. We come to Him in confidence and humility, neither doubting that He will do great things for us nor demanding them. It’s good to start our prayers with “Our Heavenly Father” or another title for God. From the very beginning, it establishes who He is, who we are, and how we relate to Him through the rest of our prayer.

“Hallowed be your name.” Let’s be honest: we don’t know what “hallowing” means and we aren’t sure why a name is so important. So let’s clear those up. When we pray well, we pray that God would be glorified and that we would recognize Him as holy and unique. To “hallow” something is to acknowledge it as set apart, as distinct, unique from us, and special. In ancient times, a person’s name stood for everything they were. When we say “hallowed be your name,” we pray that people everywhere would magnify God as the awesome and unique being He is, that He would be given all glory and honor, and that He would be respected above all else.

This should make us stop and think: if I’m praying for this, am I doing it myself? Christians sometimes use “God” as a curse word, which isn’t good and breaks the letter of it. But the spirit of the prayer is even more important. When we pray this, we’re asking that God be revered, honored, and praised in every way. Are we doing that? Saturday nights are a start. But when we pray it, not only should we want it to be true, we should begin asking, “How am I doing this in my own life each and every day?” This starts with us.

What does it mean to ask that God’s Kingdom come? It means that God has a Kingdom, and it is on the way. When we pray this, we ask that God’s Kingdom would come right away! We who are Christians long for God to finally come and set things right, to bring His reign fully into our midst so that we might see Him, so that we might no longer sin but be right with Him entirely, so that the salvation we hope for would be complete. When we pray “Your Kingdom come” in our prayers, we’re asking for all the hopes and dreams and promises of God’s eternal Kingdom to come to fruition, and come quickly! Not just for us, not just because we benefit, but because when God’s Kingdom is more and more realized here on earth, God is glorified more and more and acknowledged by more and more people.

“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This phrase brings all of us in line with what God desires. God’s will is done completely, perfectly, without sin in heaven. It isn’t down here. We wrestle with getting our own way and doing our own thing. This might be the scariest part of the Lord’s Prayer – what does it mean to ask that God’s will be done on earth? Does it mean that we might not get our way? That we might suffer in order to become more godly? That our will dies on the cross to fulfill His will? All of these are possibilities. But those possibilities are worth it. Author Donald Spence Jones at the turn of the 20th century wrote, “There is no place in heaven for a will opposed to the Divine will. The presence of such a will would be a contradiction to the everlasting harmony, a note of discord in the angelic song.”

The Lord's Prayer is a beautiful prayer that will draw us closer to God as we mean it sincerely and God fulfills it. It's dangerous, and it's good. God's will is based on the eternal picture, not the present one. When we pray this phrase, when we say these words, this part of the outline, we are throwing ourselves headlong into the breach, into the fight against sin and depravity, against our own waywardness and selfishness, so that when the time for eternity comes, we will be ready. Pray it and mean it, and you will be closer to God.

Now come the petitions that nothing would draw us away from devotion to God. The first is, "Give us today our daily bread." This is a prayer for the needs of the day. Jesus taught a parable in Matthew 13 about a farmer throwing his seeds everywhere. He says many receive the Word of God, but the worries of this life and the deceit of wealth choke out their growth and fruitfulness, like a seed that tries to take root amongst thorns.

We know what this is like. We worry about things that steal our joy in God. We think we have to provide for ourselves, but all our provision comes from God. Jesus will deal with this issue in more depth next week. But when we ask for our daily bread, we acknowledge that even the money we earn that pays for things comes from God. We recognize that not everything we want, we need today. And we trust that God will meet our immediate needs so that we can remain focused on Him.

This part of the prayer also gives us assurance in difficult times – if we need it, God will supply it. A few weeks ago, the Foam Factory owner decided he isn't interested in renting to churches any more. It looked perfect to us. But the truth is, if we believe this prayer, we know that place isn't the place God has for us. It isn't what we need today. When God has the right place for us at the right time that we can afford, God will make it available to us. When God is ready for us to move, the way will be clear. We believe that when we pray this prayer.

The next thing we have to sort out to serve God is our guilt before Him, so we pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Sometimes the Lord's Prayer has "trespasses" instead of "debts," and that's the word Jesus uses when He tells us that we must forgive to be forgiven by the Father. Here's how it works – when we disobey God and do something against Him or our neighbor, we have sinned; we have trespassed over the boundary of the law. We've gone over the fence that says "no trespassing." When we do that, we are now indebted; we have a debt that is owed to God and to the person we've harmed. Trespasses lead to debts. When we break the law, God can forgive the debt, but there is no way we can repay it.

The glorious thing about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is that God has made a way for us to be forgiven, for our debt to be repaid, and for us to be accepted into His Kingdom. Jesus takes the penalty for our sins and covers the debt. If you've never become His follower and asked Him to cover your sin, do it! Forgiveness is yours when you entrust your life to Him.

But what's this stuff about forgiving others? It sounds like we're trying to earn something; I forgive, so I should be forgiven. But it's not like that. We're saved by God's grace alone, not by anything we do, not even forgiving others. Forgiving others doesn't earn us something. Instead, forgiving others is a sign that we belong to God. We have been forgiven, so we forgive. Genuine, heartfelt forgiveness comes from God's work in us and not from ourselves.

There is deep evil in the world, and evil acts hurt people deeply. It is easy to forgive somebody cutting you off in traffic. It's hard to forgive those who kill and assault and steal with impunity, especially when it involves us personally. When we pray this, it is not just a plea for forgiveness from God. It is our heart's cry to have a heart of forgiveness for those who wrong us maliciously and severely. It is painful. Yet when we can forgive those who have hurt us deeply, the light of the love of God replaces the darkness of unforgiveness.

The final two phrases, “and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one,” are interconnected. James 1:14 tells us that God cannot be tempted nor does He tempt anyone. James says we are tempted when we are led by our own evil desires. However, God has the right to allow someone to be tempted. The Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. God allowed Satan to bring calamities on Job, and Job is tempted by his wife to curse God and die. There are times when God tests us for our own good; when we pass the test, we are strengthened in our faith; when we fail, we are humbled and shown that our strength comes from God alone. When we pray this part of the prayer, we acknowledge that we far too easily slip into sin on our own; we ask that God would keep us from paths where we are likely to fall into sin.

We also ask for deliverance from the evil one. The Greek can be read as “evil” or “the evil one.” We believe in both – evil is the absence of God’s goodness, and it’s personified in our spiritual enemy the devil. There are genuinely evil people who delight in doing things contrary to the will of God. When we pray, we ask God to keep us from evil in every form!

Remember that we said our worries and fears keep us from a close relationship with God. Think how often we don't do good out of fear. We fear we'll be ripped off, so we don't give to the guy begging on the street corner. We hear the news and we don't go out and meet people for fear we'll get mugged or harmed or just rejected. That's especially true when those people don't look like us or sound like us. But if we pray that God will deliver us from evil, we can go out into the world confident – not that there isn't evil out there, but that God will keep us safe. If life and death are in His hands, when we pray for deliverance, then we can confront genuine evil, knowing that whatever happens, God is in control and loves us. The faithful believer knows that in life and in death, God will deliver His children and bring them safely home.

Now here's the very cool part. If you know this prayer, you have Jesus' handbook of prayer with you everywhere you go. (If you don't have it memorized, do it. It's easy!) If you know the Lord's Prayer, you can pray effectively whether you are praying on your own or leading a group far larger than this one. You can pray using your own words! The words of the Lord's Prayer are wonderful, and you can use them, but you don't have to. Scripture is filled with tons of prayers that aren't this one. It is a great guide to prayer.

The next time you pray, pray through the meaning of the Lord's Prayer. Take it a phrase at a time and insert your own thoughts and words as you go. As you pray “Our Father in heaven,” contemplate names God gives us for Himself in Scripture – Ancient of Days, King of Kings, Savior, Shepherd, the Great I Am. Thank Him for making Himself known to us as a loving Father. As you pray “hallowed be your name,” ask Him how you can glorify Him in your own life this very day, and listen for a response! Take each petition and make it your own. You will be praying the Lord's Prayer, and as you pray in honesty and humility, you will be heard.

The further I dive into the Lord's Prayer, the more I get out of it. We could spend a week on each of the individual petitions. It's that rich and deep. Spend some time in the next week using the Lord's Prayer as your handbook. As John Piper encouraged us today, let's commit to making a time and place to meet with Him, and find the "how" in the Lord's Prayer. You won't be disappointed.